

## **“Rest Stop”**

*Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Matthew 26:17-35*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 3, 2022

One of the great things about a road trip is that you are able to stop and see things you never even knew existed. Several years ago we were driving through Nebraska and saw a billboard for a gas station that said it was located at the turn to go to “Carhenge.” I immediately said, “I don’t know what that is but I’m sure we need to see it.” So we ended up driving down this tiny gravel road until we got to a recreation of Stonehenge in England made entirely of old cars. We are now just two weeks away from Easter and so we are nearing the end of this sermon series on stops along the road to the cross. We have been looking at important moments in Jesus’ journey to the cross and today we’re looking at what I call a rest stop on that journey. Jesus takes this time to spend with his closest disciples.

This passage is a major turning point in Matthew’s gospel, the turn toward “home,” toward the climax of the whole story: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, which are the most important events in the history of the world.

The passage begins with the disciples asking Jesus about preparing for Passover, the annual Jewish celebration of God’s miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. This is the story of the book of Exodus in the Bible. God had sent Moses to Pharaoh to demand that he release the Hebrew people. Pharaoh refused and so God sent a series of plagues on the Egyptians, each one a little worse than the one before. The final plague was the death of all the first born in the land. However, to save his own people, God arranged for his people to mark their doors with blood from a sacrificial lamb. Wherever he found the blood on the door he would pass over, leaving everyone inside safe.

As they share this meal together, Jesus explains to his disciples that he is the *fulfillment* of the Passover. He is the sacrificial lamb and it’s *his* blood that frees them, and us, from slavery – not slavery to other people but slavery to sin. There is no escaping slavery to sin. But Jesus

promises forgiveness in this new covenant. In verse 27 he says: “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

A covenant is essentially a contract but in the Bible it’s much more than that. Like contracts covenants are all about promises and the consequences for breaking the promise. A covenant is a serious matter and biblical covenants are between God and his people. In his covenants, God makes promises and he always keeps his promises. When we look at covenants in the Old Testament we learn that they are always sealed with blood. A sacrificial animal was cut in half and the parties to the covenant would walk between the halves. This was a way of saying, “you can do this to me if I violate the terms of the covenant.” In fact the Hebrew word used for making a covenant is “to cut.”

But in addition to the promises of the covenant and the blood sealing it covenants also included a sign, a physical reminder. For example, when God made the covenant with Noah that he would never destroy the whole world by flood again, he gave Noah the sign of the rainbow. When he made the covenant with Abraham and promised that he would have more descendents than the stars in the sky, the sign of that covenant was circumcision. And Abraham said, “Wait, Noah got the rainbow. Couldn’t we come up with something else?” When God made the covenant with Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments, the sign of that covenant is the Sabbath. The day of rest not only reminds us of God’s promises but it reminds us of his laws which reminds us that we are sinners which reminds us that we need a savior. And that’s where Jesus comes in.

Jesus inaugurates the New Covenant. He promises forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. He promises that he will never leave you nor forsake you. He promises that he goes to

prepare a place for you and will come back for you one day. Like the previous ones, this new covenant also includes signs to point us to the reality of God at work. The signs of the New Covenant are the sacraments. A sacrament is something material or physical that points beyond itself to a spiritual reality. John Calvin called the sacraments an “outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.” In other words, God works through the sacraments to strengthen our faith in him.

Basically there are four elements of a sacrament. First, it is something instituted by Christ. A sacrament is something that Jesus has commanded every follower to do. Second, a sacrament is a visible sign of God’s blessing. It uses material elements but points to the reality of what God is doing. It’s not the elements that are effective but the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism points to our identification in Christ and the Lord’s Supper points to the reality of our communion with him. Third, a sacrament is a “means of grace.” God uses them to strengthen our faith. And fourth, sacraments are the seal or confirmation of the grace they signify. A good way to understand this is like a notary seal which is meaningless by itself but when it’s on a document it certifies that the signatures on the document are genuine. In the same way the sacraments certify that the promises of God are genuine.

With these four elements in mind all Christians agree on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, also called Communion. Some traditions add others but these two are virtually universally agreed upon. In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper and so this is a good opportunity to remind ourselves what it really means. As we eat the bread and drink the juice we are reminded of past events – Jesus’ last supper and his crucifixion. But there’s also a present command that we participate in Communion. Jesus commands us as his followers to eat and to drink. He says, “Do this.” He

promises that when we participate in his supper that he is here with us. By the power of the Holy Spirit we are changed to be more like Jesus and to *want* to be more like him. And then there’s the future reality signified. The Lord’s Supper is a taste of the renewed fellowship we will have with Christ, a fellowship broken by sin. In a sense, as we come to the table we are spiritually joined with all believers from all times and places.

Finally, I want us to think about what Jesus’ promise of forgiveness means for us. When he said that one of his disciples would betray him, notice that they didn’t point their finger at Judas and say, “I knew it!” Instead, each began to wonder if he would be the one. Deep down in their hearts they each knew that they were capable of it. In fact, in verse 31 Jesus says that they will all abandon him. Peter was the most adamant that he would not and Jesus foretold Peter’s denial. The truth is that we will abandon Jesus, too. We may even deny we know him. None of us is perfect. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Jesus knew the disciples would fail and so he promised them forgiveness and restoration. He promises the same thing to you. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. Jesus stands ready to forgive you, not because you deserve it but out of his love for you.

When you participate in communion you are making a bold statement. You are publicly professing that you are forgiven by God and are part of his family. When you eat the bread and drink the juice you are confessing that you accept and believe Jesus’ promises. So today as we celebrate communion together, think about how much Christ has done for you. Think about his promises. Let the communion elements remind you of those promises and point you to Jesus as the fulfilment of them. Let them remind you of Jesus’ resurrection, which is the proof that he keeps his promises. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with his presence. Let go of your guilt and accept his forgiveness. When you do, you’ll know why the disciples left that upper room singing!

*Amen.*